

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, July 25, 1883, with transcript

Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel (Hubbard) Bell. L Washington, D. C., July 25th, 1883.

You poor patient little darling

Waiting so long for a letter from me without complaining. I love you dear and am sorry not to have written to you as faithfully as you have to me.

Midnight has come at last — all is beautifully quiet — and I am about to break a promise to you — only to keep another. I promised to write and I promised not to sit up late — and I have found the two things incompatible with one another.

I reached Washington safely Monday morning and — although it was only six o'clock in the morning found Mr. Moxley at the Depot with buggy and pony. On the way home we bought a “Republican” and I immediately noticed the article about the Patent Office Decision. I intended to begin well and prove to you that I could write to you as in the old old time — by spending all of Monday evening in your company — as it were — on paper — when a horrid newspaper reporter made his appearance and monopolized my whole evening — till it was too late to do more than send a promissory note (1) to the Depot in a hurry to catch the mail. On the strength of the Interview I have taken the N. Y. World every day since without as yet finding the ghost of a report!

Scarcely had the reporter disappeared and my hurried scrawl been dispatched to you — when I opened the volume of 348 pages containing 2 the Decision of the Examiner of Interferences in the Patent Office and I need hardly tell you that it was only a conscientious regard for my promise to you that made me close the volume and go to bed at one o'clock in the morning. I became thoroughly i ndignant at the way the Examiner had treated my case. It really looks as if he had purposely looked at my testimony under the worst

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possible aspect — so as to show that even from that point of view the priority belonged to me.

This mode of treatment has led him to make what appears to me to be a false decision in the one case he has decided against me — which has an important bearing upon the form of apparatus now in use — (hand telephone, etc.). He claims that I never constructed a Receiving Telephone containing a stretched membrane and attached armature until July 1875 — the one constructed on the 2d of June 1875 being only a “transmitter” (though identical in all important points with the other) — and used from the first as a Receiver with such instruments as I had (multiple telegraph instruments — tuned reeds, etc.) as well as a Transmitter. He also denies that there is any evidence even of conception of such a Receiver in my case, earlier than June 1875 — whereas I described it to my father in July 1874 and to Dr. Blake, Oct. 1874. Also about same time to Prof. Lovering — Moses G. Farmer and some others whose names I have forgotten. Also to Prof. Henry in Washington in March 1875, also your father and Mr. Sanders, Oct. 1874.

My father's recollections are too indefinite to enable him to corroborate any detail of my early descriptions — Prof. Henry is dead. Lovering does not seem to remember much about it. Farmer told me he had made some note in his diary or note-book about my conversation but could not remember in detail. But Dr. Blake fully corroborated my testimony. Membranes coming within his professional observation — he was able to testify that the membranes telephone (of course Receiver as well as Transmitter) — the distinction is ridiculous in such a case as the instruments were to be identical — the distinction is one of name only — each instrument being a Transmitter or Receiver accordingly as you spoke or listened to it.

Dr. Blake fully corroborated my evidence that the membrane telephone was discussed between us in October 1874. If Prof. Henry were only alive he would undoubtedly remember also — as membranes etc. — acoustical apparatus of all kinds indeed — were strictly in his line — but your father and Mr. Sanders cannot help me.

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I notice that the Examiner claims that “McDonough” one of the parties to the Interference has satisfactorily proved that he made and used in May 1875 — a Receiver having a diaphragm and magnet in close proximity to one another “ in transmitting and reproducing musical tones ” but does not give him the credit of earlier conception — although he says: “There is some evidence tending to show an earlier conception of this invention, but he cannot derive any benefit therefrom because of his unreasonable delay and want of diligence prior to May 1875 in carrying into practice his designs.”

I shall study up McDonough's Testimony as it may of course be the case that the Examiner has treated his dates in as rough-handed a way as he has done mine — but if the Examiner's statement of “earlier conception” is just then I feel sure that Dr. Blake's 4 corroboration of my testimony entitles me to p riority of conception — my date back certainly to Oct. 1874.

Then in regard to construction — I am sure I am entitled to the 2d of June 1875 — as established by the testimony of Watson and myself — date being fixed precisely by a letter written to your father on that day. McDonough's earliest date — May 1875 — is an indefinite expression — and comes so close to my date — that it should be scrutinized with care. If it was the end of May that would bring it within 2 days of my date!

I must say that I don't understand how this Interference — “Interference G” — as it is called should be included in a Speaking Telephone Case. McDonough is not even a party to the Interference regarding priority of Invention of the Speaking Telephone — and it should seem that all claims upon a form of apparatus should be subordinate to the main issue . I have always understood all the Interferences to have reference alone to Speaking Telephones. If any form of Receiver used for the production of musical tones comprising a diaphragm in close proximity to a magnet — can be called a Speaking Telephone — then I am not so sure but what I made a Speaking Telephone before I invented the Speaking

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Telephone !! I am pretty sure that I used a banjo (!) in some of my early experiments with musical sounds.

Now a banjo has a membrane or diaphragm and I am pretty sure that the membrane carried a stretched string of iron or steel which was subjected to the attraction of a magnet — connected with an Interrupter. Was this banjo therefore a Speaking Telephone?! Although 5 not intended for this purpose — I am pretty sure that I could now make such a banjo speak by connecting it in proper manner with Blake Transmitter, etc., Q. B. D. 11?

The treatment of my testimony by the Examiner made me so indignant that I did not sleep a wink all Monday night — and consequently Tuesday saw me with one of my miserable headaches which was not by any means improved by the hot sultry weather. Please don't blame me for not writing to you on Tuesday. I had an agony of a time — and indeed I began to have a realizing sense of the supposed sufferings of the?!!!

If you had been here you would have understood how genuine was the feeling that dictated my telegram of Tuesday night. The only thing that prevented me from fleeing to Oakland on Wednesday was the fact that I expected Mr. Michelson as a guest — and I guessed he would come.

Wednesday was pretty hot too — but I managed to keep comfortable in the draft of the Laboratory fan-wheel and in the evening my visitor arrived. It is perfectly delightful to meet a man with whom I can talk my thoughts — and with whom I can discuss intelligently all the questions that interest me. I think that Mr. Michelson is enjoying his stay with me too. I am very glad to have this opportunity of knowing more of him — for I have a very high respect for his abilities — (though I rather suspect from his manner that he has too). Well if a man has great natural abilities I don't see why he should be blamed if he recognizes the fact.

I am enjoying Michelson's visit very much indeed — and I feel that he too is not altogether disappointed. Since I came to America I have made a great many acquaintances but very

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few “ friends .” Michelson 6 is one of the few young men towards whom I have felt drawn naturally. There seems to be a natural sympathy between our minds — and we have been discussing the affairs of the Universe ! with a vengeance.

Gravitation — Electricity — Magnetism — Meteorology — Chemistry — Moleculars, Atome, “Points of Matter” — Education — and I don't know what else — Evolution and Religion — are a few of the topics. Don't wonder therefore that I have had to wait for this opportunity of writing to you.

Daylight begins to appear and I find it is now tomorrow morning! I must tell you something about affairs here however. Workmen are all over the house by which I mean they have been “over” the house all day on the roof ! hammering away at the new rafters. The skeleton of the new roof is now nearly completed and I suppose will be tomorrow. The excavation for the bath-room extension is I think complete and I expect them to commence to build tomorrow.

A scaffolding has been erected in the corner where the extension will be — and on the roof there — there is a sort of extemporized crane by means of which the men have been hauling planks up to the roof. I went up there this afternoon and it really looked more like a lumber yard than a roof.

The Plumber has shot off the water from the house — so we now have to be supplied from the stable . This afternoon (I mean of course yesterday) I was horrified to find everything cleared out of the bathroom next the nursery — bath-tubs and — and — every other convenience GONE ! Same down stairs! Not a bathroom in the whole house. All such conveniences are now banished to the stable.

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Now I hope you can see my nice little wifie that I can write you a longer letter than you can read if I only am allowed to do it at a suitable time. You needn't think that I have said one-half of what I have to write about — but I think it is about time to close — and I need not

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waste my time when I should be in bed — when I know you won't read all I have written even now.

Thank you my darling for your letters. I am only afraid each time a letter comes to see the scolding I deserve. You are very good and patient and I love you very much. Poor little May — what a time you are having to be sure. Elsie and Daisy have been spoiled by their illness but I am sure we could not have had better children in the whole world. Elsie is naturally good and kind-hearted — and Daisy naturally affectionate — but I am afraid not particularly good (!) — and yet I feel sure that at heart she is all right — and that whatever symptoms of naughtiness she may have — are signs that Nature makes to us to show us that Daisy has not been thoroughly understood — and that we have to be careful how we manage her. I must say — I feel — with you — very much troubled at many little things — nothing in themselves — but straws — that show the way the wind blows . We must be just and consistent in our treatment of our children and above all things kind. I don't believe in “rewards and punishments ” as a means of managing very young children — but in “ rewards and no rewards” — This means positive praise — and negative punishment — (the absence of that which is prized) — not pain (mental and physical) which stirs up harsh feelings in a child. Your late experience must convince you how potent may be the influence exerted by candy (!) upon conduct. However mortifying it may be to admit the fact — still I have no doubt that very young children are so much more animals than men — that the gratification of the stomach would to them prove a higher inducement than the gratification of the feelings or mind. Don't make your “Candy” too common though — “That which is most denied is prized the most.” I fear we may make a mistake if we let them have it regularly. This plan may lead them to look upon their reward as a right — and to feel aggrieved if it is held from them. Why wouldn't it be a good plan to have two grades of candy !! That which they like best to be talked about very often and given — Oh! so very rarely and then — only by you spontaneously — never upon entreaty. “Never” — not “hardly ever”! Such candy as that would be worth its weight in gold. If we were consistent with them they would know it was no use their asking for it for they never could get it in

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that way. They shouldn't feel that every time they are good they are to get it — or they will expect it — and feel a sense of injustice if they don't get it. Nor should this Double Extra Fine A 1 Candy be promised to be given if certain good actions are performed — for here also the child acquires a sort of right to demand the reward — which should, to give the highest pleasure, come spontaneously — an unexpected reward of unbribed good conduct.

The appreciation of the children would be proportional to the rarity of the reward. It would always give pleasure — and the non-bestowal of it would never give pain for it would never be expected .

How is that for high?! As Lloyd says a hundred times a day into the doctor's Transmitter.

And now — good n-morning. Please don't scold me for sitting up just this once to write to my little wife.

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Here is a big kiss for Elsie, Daisy and Mama — share it between you.

Your loving husband, Alec. Mrs. A. G. Bell, Oakland.